

# THE BLOOD OF KINGS

## A NEW INTERPRETATION OF MAYA ART



September 10, 1986

### CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART HOSTS LANDMARK EXHIBITION OF MAYA ART

One of the most important exhibitions of Maya art ever assembled will be shown at The Cleveland Museum of Art from October 8 through December 14, 1986. Titled The Blood of Kings: A New Interpretation of Maya Art, it contains some of the most powerful and historically significant works of art ever created in the Western hemisphere.

Described as a "landmark" by The New York Times, the exhibition contains 112 works on loan from museums in the United States, Great Britain, The Netherlands, and Honduras. It was organized by the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, in association with The Cleveland Museum of Art, and focuses on the "Golden Age" of Maya civilization, A.D. 200-900, when the arts, astronomy and mathematics flourished.

The exhibition is significant because of the exceptional quality of the works, many of which are rarely seen by the public, and their historic importance in light of recent breakthroughs in Maya scholarship, which present startling new insights into Maya civilization.

Ruins of Maya palaces and temples were discovered in the jungles of Central America by Western explorers in the mid-19th century. However, Maya art, filled with complex imagery and hieroglyphic script, has remained largely

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Fort Worth May 17-August 24, 1986 • Cleveland October 8-December 14, 1986

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART 11150 East Boulevard Cleveland, Ohio 44106 216-421-7340

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a mystery. Although some inscriptions were correctly interpreted as numerical and calendrical data, Maya hieroglyphics remained undecipherable. It was not until the 1960s that scholars were able for the first time to begin reading the histories the Maya had recorded. The Blood of Kings is the first exhibition to examine Maya art and civilization with this new and revolutionary knowledge.

What scholars learned, and what the exhibition graphically demonstrates, is that the Maya were not the utopian, peaceful people they were once thought to be. Instead, they lived in fiercely competitive city states ruled by powerful kings, engaged in constant warfare, and participated in often violent ritual. The exhibition's title refers to this darker side of Maya culture and to themes depicted in Maya art: the bloodlines of royalty, the violence of warfare and sport, and the importance of ritual bloodletting.

"We want the audience to understand that the written history of the Americas begins not in 1492 but in 50 B.C., and that these are the Tutankhamens and the Alexanders of the Americas," said Professor Linda Schele of The University of Texas at Austin. Schele, a pioneering researcher in the field of Maya inscriptions whose discoveries helped decipher the writing system, was guest curator of the exhibition with Professor Mary Ellen Miller of Yale University.

The works in the exhibition include monumental stone reliefs, terra-cotta figurines, carved and painted pottery, and ornaments and ritual objects of jade, shell and bone. Each was chosen for its quality and for the information it provides about the history, rituals and religious beliefs of the Maya. A jade plaque engraved with the figure of a richly dressed king, now in the

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Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, the Netherlands, is the most famous Maya jade in the world.

The British Museum has lent seventeen works, including six masterfully carved stone lintels depicting royal rituals, taken to England from Yaxchilan, Mexico, in the 19th century, and now returning to the Americas for the first time. From Honduras comes the center marker from the great ballcourt at Copan. There are also five important works from The Cleveland Museum of Art's Pre-Columbian collection, including an impressive stone head of the God of the Number Zero from Copan.

"This truly is an awesome collection," said Dr. Evan H. Turner, Director of The Cleveland Museum of Art. "For the viewer, there is astonishing artistic quality in each of the objects selected. For the art historian, it is an unprecedented showing of the true greatness of Maya art. And for students of history, it is the most definitive statement yet of our new understanding of Maya civilization. No Maya exhibition ever has been assembled to compare with this."

The Blood of Kings is being shown only twice: in Fort Worth, where it was exhibited earlier this year, and in Cleveland. The Cleveland showing is sponsored by Ameritech and Ohio Bell. The exhibition is also supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and has received an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.

Admission to The Cleveland Museum of Art, as well as the exhibition The Blood of Kings, is free at all times.

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A companion to the show is a major new study of Pre-Columbian art, The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art, by Linda Schele, Associate Professor of Art at the University of Texas in Austin, and Mary Ellen Miller, Associate Professor of the History of Art at Yale University, who served as guest curators for the exhibition. Their 335-page volume, published by the Kimbell Museum of Art, is illustrated with 122 color plates and 300 original drawings, and documents the revolution that has taken place in Maya studies during the past 25 years. A recent book reviewer in The New York Times wrote: "Ms. Schele and Ms. Miller do a thorough job of summarizing and assessing recent scholarship on the subject. Their sumptuously illustrated book...stands on its own as a elegantly written narrative history of the Mayas."

The book is available at the Museum Bookstore in a paperback edition at \$26.50 (\$22.50 for Museum members) and in hardback for \$45.00 ((\$38.25 for Museum members).

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For additional information, photographs, color slides, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.



# THE BLOOD OF KINGS

## A NEW INTERPRETATION OF MAYA ART



### THE BLOOD OF KINGS - HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Ever since the first discoveries of the material remains of the many cultures and civilizations that flourished in North America, their ancient history has been largely shrouded in mystery. With the exception of the last Aztec ruler, Montezuma, no personalities or dynastic histories were known, and no real understanding of the lives and concerns of the earliest inhabitants of this continent was possible.

One of the most tantalizing of these mysterious civilizations was that of the ancient Maya. During the Classic Period (A.D. 200-900), artistic, intellectual, and spiritual expression reached its highest level on the continent--a level comparable and equal to that of other, more familiar ancient civilizations. Great cities were built, and a subtle and complex written language was developed. The diversified Maya peoples created complex social and religious systems and pursued advanced agricultural, astronomical, and artistic endeavors.

Though the Maya have been investigated continually since their ruined, jungle-choked cities were discovered in the mid-19th century, very little was known about their rulers or beliefs or why they created the art and architecture which extends throughout southeastern Mexico, Guatemala, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador. Their writings, which covered large areas of their buildings and monuments, were unreadable and seemed destined to remain so.

In recent years, however, knowledge of the ancient Maya has progressed by quantum leaps. Beginning in 1960, work by Mayanists has radically changed our

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## 2-the blood of kings/historic background

interpretation of Maya art and civilization. Breakthroughs in deciphering the hieroglyphic script have fostered a completely new understanding of how the Maya viewed themselves and their world. Moreover, translations of the hieroglyphs have enabled scholars to recognize, for the first time, real historical personalities in the ancient history of this continent. It is now possible to identify these people, not as mysterious astronomer-priests of some forgotten past, but as rulers and nobles who governed cities.

The deciphered inscriptions on Maya monuments permit the reconstruction of events depicted in their art. The histories and accomplishments of the Maya rulers are now known, complete with firm dates for major events in their lives: births, marriages, accession to the throne, wars, the taking of captives, and deaths. Their works of art have also yielded information about their myths and legends, gods and heroes, and beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife. Research has illuminated the central concepts of their world-view, such as the nature and definition of time and the structure of the cosmos.

### Content and Aim of the Exhibition

The Blood of Kings: A New Interpretation of Maya Art differs from all previous exhibitions of Maya art in its scope and organization. The exhibition consists of 112 carefully selected objects of supreme artistic quality which focus attention on a series of events and rituals typical of the lives of Maya rulers in the Classic Period. The objects include carved stone reliefs, ceramic figurines, carved and painted ceramic vessels, and precious objects in a variety of media, including portrait masks in jade and stone, jade jewelry, and ornaments and ritual objects of shell, bone, and flint.

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These works of art are grouped to illustrate eight major themes in Maya art. The first, "The Royal Person," focuses on costumes worn by Maya rulers, including masks, headdresses, necklaces, pectorals, and ear ornaments, as well as sacred objects used in rituals. This group features a large jade ornament of a Jester God, a symbol of kingship typically worn on the headband of a Maya lord, lent by the Utah Museum of Fine Arts; a stone relief depicting a richly dressed woman of high rank, from The Cleveland Museum of Art; and a jade mask from the Late Preclassic Period (100 B.C.-A.D. 100) that had lain in the vaults of The British Museum since the late 19th century.

The second theme, "Kingship and the Rite of Accession," treats the most important event in a king's life, the inauguration of his reign. The Maya institution of kingship was deemed essential for the well-being of society and for the continuance of the universe. It was important for Maya rulers to demonstrate, through ritual and art, that their rule was sanctioned by the gods and that they were of the proper lineage, which they often traced to the gods themselves, or to the Olmec, an earlier Central American civilization of almost legendary character. An Olmec quartzite pectoral dating to around 1000-600 B.C., lent by Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., demonstrates how Maya rulers used Olmec symbols of power to sanction or legitimize their positions. The pectoral, depicting an Olmec deity, is inscribed on the back with a portrait of a Maya ruler of the Late Preclassic Period and a text recording his accession. Also illustrating the theme of kingship is the magnificent Leiden Plaque, which records the accession of a Maya ruler in A.D. 320, and a stone panel from the late 8th-century temple of Yax-Pac, last king of Copan, depicting the king with nineteen of his predecessors.

#### 4-the blood of kings/historic background

The theme of "Courtly Life" examines the activities of the Maya court and the king's relations with his peers and subordinates. A carved lintel from Piedras Negras, lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, shows a ruler and seven youths in what is probably an initiation ritual for young men. Finely painted vases depict enthroned rulers receiving gifts or tribute from their subjects. The activities of daily life are glimpsed in works depicting women and in the representations of gods associated with writing and the arts, weaving, and the growing of maize.

Theme four, "Bloodletting and the Vision Quest," documents the role of bloodletting through bodily mutilation as a regular ritual of Maya life. The functions of this ritual were to achieve visions, symbolized as great rearing serpents, that to the Maya were the means of contacting the gods and the ancestral dead, and to nourish the gods so that they might continue to sustain the universe. Two well-preserved series of limestone lintels depicting these rites, from Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, both lent by The British Museum, are widely admired as great masterpieces of Maya art. Exhibited with these monuments is an extraordinary carved ceramic bowl found in San Agustín Acasaguastlan, Guatemala, and lent by the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, which shows the Sun God creating the cosmos through the vision rite.

The fifth theme, "War and Captive Sacrifice," dispels forever a modern misconception of the Maya as a gentle, peace-loving people. Several dramatic stone reliefs and figurines depicting warriors and captives taken in battle document in realistic detail the state of constant war that existed among many Maya cities.



## 5-the blood of kings/historic background

"The Ballgame," the subject of the sixth theme, presents an aspect of Maya culture that was both a sport and a ritual activity of great importance in which captives of the highest ranks, usually kings, were sacrificed. In addition to the famous center marker from the Copan ballcourt, from Honduras, two especially beautiful painted vases, one from the Dallas Museum of Art and the other from the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, show the ballgame in play. A finely carved stairway riser from The Art Institute of Chicago depicts a noble (or perhaps a king) at the point of losing the game shortly before he is to be sacrificed, by having his head cut off or by being rolled down a stairway like a ball.

The final themes, "Death and the Journey through Xibalba" and "Kingship and the Maya Cosmos," are closely connected. The Maya believed that the souls of the dead descended into Xibalba, the Maya Hell or Underworld, where they were required to defeat the lords of death in order to ensure their rebirth into the sky as celestial beings. One of the most powerful images of death is a carved flint from the Dallas Museum of Art which depicts the Celestial Monster diving into the waters of the Underworld with a dead soul on its back. Much of the imagery describing the Underworld appears on vessels found in tombs, the most beautiful and famous of which are pots painted with a fine linear brushwork from the Art Museum, Princeton University, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. An extraordinary incised drawing on a cylindrical vessel lent by the American Museum of Natural History illustrates the relationship of kingship to the Maya cosmos. It pictures the movement of sacred beings through the levels of the cosmos--the Underworld, Middleworld, and Overworld--and describes in symbolic terms the role of kingly rituals in

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the maintenance of cosmic order and as a means of communication between the natural and supernatural worlds.

#### Important Loans

The European loans are especially significant. All of them are from collections formed in the late 19th or early 20th century and are objects rarely seen by the public. In fact, with the exception of those from the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, none of the pieces has been on view in Europe for at least fifteen years, even in their own institutions.

From The British Museum, the major group of six stone lintels from Yaxchilan, and the stone panels from Temple 11, Copan, which are incomparable masterpieces in the history of Maya art, bear remarkable portraits and ritual scenes that are now correctly documented for the first time. Yaxchilan Lintels 15, 17, 24, and 25, as well as a lintel from La Pasadita, Guatemala, now in Leiden, are the finest illustrations of the ritual bloodletting peculiar to Maya kingship. The sculptures, jades, and vessels from The British Museum are unique pieces that embody information not found anywhere else in the world.

The Leiden plaque is a singular object, a jade plaque incised with the image of a ruler over a glyphic inscription that makes it the earliest dated accession monument. A group of objects from Honduras--a jade necklace and three vessels dating to about 800-600 B.C., recently found in graves in Copan--show how Olmec designs were used early in the development of Maya culture.

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### THE BLOOD OF KINGS - FREE PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**Special Guest Lectures:** Wednesdays at 5:45 pm in the Recital Hall

- September 10      Royal Cities of the Classic Maya  
Michael D. Coe, Professor of Anthropology,  
Yale University
- October 8          The Blood of Kings: History and Religion Through Art  
Linda Schele, Associate Professor of Art, University  
of Texas at Austin
- November 12      The Murals of Bonampak and the Rites of Maya  
Kingship  
Mary Ellen Miller, Associate Professor, History of  
Art, Yale University
- December 10      Discovering the Ancient Maya: 1750 to the Present  
George E. Stuart, Staff Archaeologist, The National  
Geographic Society, and President, Center for Maya  
Research, Washington, D.C.

**Lectures by Cleveland  
Museum of Art Staff:**

Wednesdays at 2:15 pm in the Recital Hall

- October 8          Introduction to Maya Art  
Joellen DeOreo, Instructor, Department of Education
- October 15        Jade, Shell, and Bone: Maya Masterpieces in  
Miniature  
Susan Kaesgen, Instructor, Department of Education
- October 22        Terra-cotta Warriors, Women, and Whistles  
Susan Kaesgen
- October 29        The Pre-Columbian Collection of The Cleveland Museum  
of Art  
Virginia Crawford, Associate Curator of Later  
Western Art

**Gallery Talks by  
Cleveland Museum  
of Art Staff:**

Presented at 1:30 pm each day during the first week  
of the exhibition, from Wednesday, October 8,  
through Tuesday, October 14 (except Monday, when the  
Museum is closed).

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2-blood of kings/public programs

Feature Films:

Wednesdays at 8:00 pm in the Lecture Hall

- October 8                    Que Viva Mexico! (Mexico/USA/USSR, 1933/1976)  
Directed by Sergei Eisenstein. A restored version  
of Eisenstein's four-part panorama of Mexican life  
and culture. B&W; 85 min. English subtitles.
- October 15                  The Roots (Mexico, 1955) Directed by Benito  
Alazraki. A masterpiece of the Mexican cinema, based  
on four short stories by Francisco Gonzales, dealing  
with various aspects of Mexican and Indian life.  
B&W; 85 min. English subtitles.
- October 22                  Chac (USA, 1975) Directed by Rolando Klein.  
Residents of a drought-stricken Maya village set out  
to find the Rain God Chac and the "source of all  
waters." Color; 95 min. English subtitles.
- October 29                  Sentinels of Silence (USA, 1971) Narrated by Orson  
Welles. This Academy Award-winning film combines  
aerial shots of Pre-Columbian ruins with a specially  
composed music score. Color; 19 min.
- When the Mountains Tremble (USA, 1983) Directed by  
Pamela Yates and Thomas Sigel. Documentary about the  
struggle of Indian peasants to end oppression in  
Guatemala. Cleveland premiere. Color; 83 min.  
English subtitles.

Films on Maya Art:

Wednesdays at 12:30 and 7:00 pm in the Lecture Hall

All films are in color.

- October 8                    Maya Lords of the Jungle, Part I, 30 min.
- October 15                  Maya Lords of the Jungle, Part II, 29 min.
- October 22                  Yucatan: Land of the Maya and  
Maya Terra-cotta Figurines, 29 min.
- October 29                  The Maya Through the Ages, 45 min.
- November 5                  Mayaland, 40 min.
- November 12                Stairways to the Maya Gods, 28 min.
- November 19                Lost World of the Maya, 36 min.

3-blood of kings/public programs

**Audio-Visual Programs:** A videotape, The Blood of Kings, and two slide tapes, Pre-Columbian Art of Mesoamerica and Meet the Maya, will run continuously in the Museum's audio-visual center during the exhibition.

The audio-visual center is open Tuesday through Saturday from 11:30 am to 4:00 pm (Wednesday until 9:30 pm) and Sunday from 1:30 pm to 4:30 pm.

**Program of  
Mesoamerican Music:**

Wednesday, October 22, at 8:00 pm in Gartner Auditorium

Xochimoki (flower of the ancient ones)  
A duo from Taos, New Mexico, revives the rich traditions of Pre-Columbian language, music, and poetry.

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# THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

11150 EAST BOULEVARD AT UNIVERSITY CIRCLE  
CLEVELAND, OHIO 44106 CABLE ADDRESS: MUSART CLEVELAND  
EVAN H. TURNER, DIRECTOR TELEPHONE: (216) 421-7340

## THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

### PRE-COLUMBIAN COLLECTION

The Cleveland Museum of Art has a collection of more than 300 works of art created by cultures in Central and South America during the centuries before Columbus's discovery of the New World. Although Cleveland's collection is not large, it contains works of extremely high quality.

Among the masterpieces in the Museum's collection are works from the Olmec culture of Mexico (1500-100 B.C.), the ancient "mother culture" from which many other regional cultures were derived. There are fine examples of Olmec stone sculpture and rare Olmec jades, particularly a small jadeite seated figure dating from before 300 B.C. Also from Mexico is a group of works from the Veracruz region on the east coast created between A.D. 600 and 1200: a realistic and sensitively carved life-size terra-cotta head of a young man; a gray volcanic palma stone of complex design; and a massive serpentine yoke carved with realistically detailed serpents, feathers and other motifs. Among the other works of art from Mexico are Aztec (central Mexico) sculptures of high quality, including an Aztec gold figure of a warrior king (ca. A.D. 1500); a Zapotec (southern Mexico) earthenware figure from Monte Alban; and a Colima (western Mexico) earthenware dog.

The Classic Period (A.D. 200-900) of the Maya civilization of Central America is represented by many major works; among them are two powerfully carved limestone reliefs depicting human figures in ceremonial robes, and a life-size stone head with elaborate headdress. Other important Maya works

2-cleveland museum of art pre-columbian collection

from this period include a group of carved jades, a colorful ceramic warrior dressed for battle, and a shell with an incised image of a Maya lord smoking a cigarette.

The Pre-Columbian collection is rich in works of gold, including jewelry, anthropomorphic figures, plaques and masks from Panama, Colombia and Peru. Examples of pottery from Central and South America, while fewer in number, are particularly fine. Especially noteworthy are a stirrup-spouted jar decorated with relief carvings of stylized jaguar heads from the Chavin culture, the earliest high culture in Peru, dating from the first millennium B.C., and stirrup-spouted jars shaped like human heads from the Mochica culture of northern Peru, dating from 600-200 B.C.

The only surviving examples of the textiles produced in Pre-Columbian America are those that have been preserved in the arid climate of coastal burial sites in Peru. In the Museum's collection of Peruvian textiles are outstanding and very rare works. The oldest, a Chavin ritual cloth with designs of deity faces, dates from about 1000-600 B.C. and is the largest and most complete example of its type known. The most important of a large group of textiles from the Paracas culture, which flourished on the south coast of Peru slightly later than the Chavin, is a large embroidered wool shroud or ceremonial cloth with repeat designs of double-headed birds, dating from around 300-100 B.C. A cotton ceremonial cloth with painted designs of cat deities, dating from the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D., is the most famous and finest example known of the rare painted textiles of the Nazca culture of the southern coast. Important textiles of later date include woven tapestries and knotted pile hats from the Huari culture of central Peru (ca. A.D. 700-1100), and a superb group of Inca textiles (ca. A.D. 1400-1532).